

Can ALL Christians Speak in Tongues, at Will?

Introduction

Some Christian denominations place quite a bit of emphasis on two specific manifestations of the Spirit - the manifestations of *speaking in tongues* and *interpreting of tongues*.

From what I have seen, those denominations have the following basic belief, about speaking in tongues and interpreting of tongues:

All Christians can do legitimate speaking and interpreting of tongues, whenever **they** decide to.

In other words, those groups believe that *each and every* Christian can perform Spirit-empowered speaking and interpreting of tongues, *whenever* they want to.

For simplicity, I'll refer to that doctrine as the "Tongues at Will" doctrine.

Of course, as with any other doctrine, it is important to determine if this Tongues at Will doctrine is supported by Scripture as a whole. In other words, the question is: Do **all** of the references to speaking and interpreting tongues support that doctrine? So, let's explore that question.

Verses Used to Support the Doctrine

From my experience, most groups use the following clause as their strongest support for the Tongues at Will doctrine:

1 Corinthians 14:5a (NIV):

I would like every one of you to speak in tongues,

Note that the above clause is *not* the entire verse – i.e., there is more information in the verse than that.

In any case, from the above clause, some groups claim that all Christians can speak in tongues – since the phrase "every one of you" is used. In addition, those groups also claim that Christians can speak in tongues whenever they decide to – since the phrase "I would like" is used.

In other words, some groups interpret the above clause to mean the following: "Paul is telling *all* Christians that they should *decide* to speak in tongues, on a *very* frequent basis."

In addition, some groups use the following verse, to try to support the Tongues at Will doctrine:

1 Corinthians 14:26a (NIV):

²⁶ What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.

Again, since the phrase “each of you” is used in that verse, some groups claim that means that all Christians can speak and interpret tongues.

Verses that Appear to Contradict the Doctrine

There are a number of other verses in Scripture which appear to *challenge* the Tongues at Will doctrine. Here is one rather explicit passage:

1 Corinthians 12:27-30 (NIV):

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. ²⁸ And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

The above passage certainly seems to indicate that even in the 1st century, some Christians did not speak in tongues or interpret tongues! In other words, *not all* Christians were speaking and interpreting tongues, even during the time of the apostles.

Some groups claim that that is just because those Christians *decided* not to speak or interpret tongues. In other words, those groups claim that all Christians *have the ability* to speak and interpret tongues, but some Christians just *choose* not to use that ability. As a result, they claim that that is why Paul mentioned that not everyone speaks and interprets tongues.

The above explanation does not make very much sense to me, though. First of all, that passage includes a number of *other* items in it – other than speaking and interpreting tongues. For example, Paul also asks “are all apostles”? Of course, Paul himself makes it clear that only *certain* people are called to be apostles – i.e., God does *not* call *all* Christians to be apostles.

Similarly, Paul asks “do all prophesy”? God certainly does not call everyone to be a prophet. In fact, people who *claim* to speak for God, when God has *not* called them to do so, are referred to as false prophets.

So, since not all Christians are given the ability to perform the *other* tasks in that verse, that strongly implies to me that not all Christians are given the ability to speak or interpret tongues, either.

Next, consider this passage:

1 Corinthians 12:7-11 (NIV):

⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸ To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

The above passage also appears to indicate that only *some* – not all – Christians are given the ability to speak and interpret tongues – just like only some Christians are given the ability to heal, to perform miracles, etc.

Some groups claim that speaking and interpreting tongues are “special”, compared to the other manifestations in that verse. Their reasoning is that all of the *other* manifestations were used in the Old Testament – but speaking and interpreting tongues were not. Those groups then use that fact to claim that the speaking and interpreting tongues can be used by all Christians, *at will* – but all of the other manifestations can only be used when God explicitly empowers a Christian to use them.

Of course, there is no verse in Scripture which states that speaking and interpreting tongues are “special”, compared to the other manifestations. That is, there is no verse which states that speaking and interpreting tongues have different “rules” associated with them, as compared to the other manifestations.

In addition, if speaking and interpreting tongues *did* have different rules governing them, then certainly Paul would *not* have included those manifestations in the above verse – because in that case, the tongues manifestations would not be in the same “category” with the other manifestations listed there.

So, once again, that passage certainly seems to indicate that even in the 1st century, not all Christians had the ability to speak and interpret tongues.

Now consider this passage:

1 Corinthians 14:27-28 (NIV):

²⁷ If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. ²⁸ If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God.

This passage tells us that people should *not* speak in tongues, *unless* there is someone present to interpret the speaking in tongues. That, in turn, implies that in *some* cases, there is no one available to perform interpreting of tongues.

Of course, as noted above, the Tongues at Will doctrine states that all Christians can interpret tongues, whenever they decide to! If that doctrine is true, then there would always be someone present to interpret tongues, whenever a Christian speaks in tongues – because at the very least, the Christian who is doing the *speaking* in tongues would *also* be able to *interpret* tongues.

So, the above passage definitely appears to contradict the Tongues at Will doctrine – since the verse indicates that in some cases, there is no one present who has the ability to perform the interpreting in tongues manifestation.

Of course, groups that hold the Tongues at Will doctrine claim that the above passage means that all of the Christians present just *decided* not to interpret in tongues – as opposed to not having the *ability* to interpret in tongues. However, take a look at this verse:

1 Corinthians 14:13 (NIV):

¹³ For this reason the one who speaks in a tongue should pray that they may interpret what they say.

Notice what Paul says here – Paul exhorts Christians to pray that they may interpret! That *explicitly* indicates to me that some Christians can **NOT** interpret tongues *whenever* they want to – because if they could, then there would be no reason to *pray* to have that ability!

So, from all of the above information, it appears to me that the “Tongues at Will” doctrine is not supported by Scripture.

The “Speak without Interpreting” Doctrine

From what I have seen, some other groups assert that all Christians can **speak** in tongues at will – but not all Christians can **interpret** tongues at will. As a result, those groups encourage Christians to speak in tongues frequently – even if no one is able to interpret what they are saying. In other words, those groups speak in tongues quite often in their meetings, even when *no one understands* the sounds that are produced.

I call that doctrine the “Speak without Interpreting” doctrine.

Of course, as noted above, Paul *explicitly* told Christians that they should *not* speak in tongues out loud, *unless* there is someone available to interpret:

1 Corinthians 14:28 (NIV):

²⁸ If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God.

Paul also explicitly stated that speaking in tongues is *worthless*, unless the sounds that come out are *intelligible speech*:

1 Corinthians 14:6-11 (NIV):

⁶ Now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? ⁷ Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the pipe or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? ⁸ Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? ⁹ So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. ¹⁰ Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. ¹¹ If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker is a foreigner to me.

So, in my mind, the “Speak without Interpreting” doctrine also is *not* supported by Scripture. In fact, that doctrine appears to have even **less** Scriptural support than the “Tongues at Will” doctrine does.

We Live by Faith, Not by Sight

Another item to note is that Scripture emphasizes the fact that Christians need to *believe* in God, even without being able to *detect* Him with our five senses. Here are some examples of this:

John 20:29 (NIV):

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have **not** seen and yet have believed.”

1 John 4:20 (NIV):

²⁰ Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they **have** seen, cannot love God, whom they have **not** seen.

2 Corinthians 5:7 (NIV):

⁷ For we live by faith, **not** by sight.

In my view, the above passages tell us that we need to have faith in God, even though we cannot “prove” that He exists with our five senses.

Now, if all Christians were able to use manifestations of the Spirit, whenever they wanted to, then we **would** be able to prove that God exists, with our five senses. For example, if we were able to walk on water whenever we wanted to, then that would prove to us that God exists – because we would *see* ourselves walking on water, and we would *feel* the water beneath our feet.

Similarly, if *all* Christians could do *legitimate* speaking in tongues, *whenever* they wanted to, then that would also prove to us that God exists – because we would *hear* the speaking in tongues occurring.

So, the doctrine that all Christians can use the tongues manifestations, at will, contradicts the passages which state that Christians need to have faith in God, *without* being able to prove that He exists.

What About 1 Corinthians 14:5?

As noted above, the first clause in 1 Corinthians 14:5 is frequently quoted, to try to prove that all Christians can speak in tongues, at will. Here is that clause again:

1 Corinthians 14:5a (NIV):

I would like every one of you to speak in tongues,

In my view, that clause does *not* necessarily mean that all Christians have the ability to speak in tongues. It could simply mean that Paul **would** like it, **if** all Christians spoke in tongues. Certainly, it *would* be nice, *if* all Christians could use manifestations of the Spirit *at will* – but clearly that is not the case.

In addition, take a look at the *entire* verse (rather than just the first clause of it):

1 Corinthians 14:5 (NIV):

⁵ I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified.

It appears to me that the overall context of this verse is that Paul is comparing speaking in tongues to prophesying – i.e., he is emphasizing the fact that prophesy is more important than tongues!

Conclusion

Overall, it appears to me that the “speaking in tongues” and “interpreting of tongues” manifestations operate in the *same* way as all of the *other* manifestations of the Spirit. Basically, God empowers **specific** believers, at **specific** times, to use those manifestations.

Once God *does* empower a person, though, then the person, himself, needs to “respond” – and actually **use** the manifestation. If the person does *not* respond, then the manifestation will *not* take effect.

In other words, speaking and interpreting tongues use a “reciprocal relationship”, between God and people – just like all of the *other* miracles that were performed by people in Scripture. For more information on this “reciprocal relationship”, see [this article](#).

Some people may ask, “Does legitimate speaking in tongues ever happen **today**?” I don’t have a definite belief about that question. It *may* be that God still does empower specific people, at specific times, to do legitimate speaking in tongues; or it may *not* be.

In any case, it certainly appears to me that legitimate speaking in tongues is **not** something that can be done by *all* Christians, *whenever* they decide to do it.

As usual, that is just my own, imperfect understanding, of course!